

# MCC Peace Section Task Force on Women in Church & Society

## REPORT

Report 23

December, 1978

### Focus on Family Violence

To understand the possible causes of family violence a look at the position of women historically may be of help. In this regard the church and society have been close friends.

In patriarchal society it was assumed that women and children were of subordinate and dependent status and were the property of the husband or father. Women and children (particularly girls) were denied the full rights of society. Parents had the right to beat children and to kill them in some situations.

Aristotle in the third century B.C. saw women as natural servants, obedient in all things to their head and master. He also regarded the body as evil, women in his opinion represented the carnal and should be dominated by men. He believed women were a secondary biological species.

Biblical literature, interpreted by Jews and Christians, also reflects primary status for males. Many understand the Old Testament creation story as suggesting male domination and female inferiority.

In the New Testament Jesus' liberating relationship to women is often ignored in favor of Paul's more ambivalent position. One can choose to read that women "has no head of her own--but her husband is her head," or to read in Galatians that "there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave or free, male or female."

St. Augustine saw women as unclean beings who lacked the image of God. They could gain God's image only when united with man but would remain unable to represent Christ in Christian society.

Church law justified husbands beating their wives. Canon law gave the male the right to chastise his wife; he could beat her moderately but not tie her up and beat her. At the same time rabbinic law allowed a woman to ask for divorce if her husband beat her.

Throughout history the attitude of subjugation made violence in the family acceptable. In the Middle Ages men were exhorted from the pulpit to beat their wives, and wives to kiss the rod that beat them.

Martin Luther relaxed somewhat during the Reformation and conceded that Eve and Adam were created equal but sin demoted her. Anabaptists varied in their views on the position of women from traditional to the most progressive views in their time.

The Puritans spoke out against physical violence in marriage and at the same time used extreme violence to punish so-called witches. Witches were marginal, independent women often practicing midwifery or herbal medicine, occupations open to single women. One thesis is that they were suspect because historically Christianity considered women inferior and subordinate and they threatened this definition.

Although in the 19th century cracks began to appear in the system of subjugation of women, we are still not completely free of it, in part because religious belief and doctrine assert that the subordinate status of women is ordained of God. Violence seems to be an extreme but ultimate result of male dominance of women and the female belief in or submission to this pattern of dominance.

Your first reaction may be as mine--that we as Mennonites are an historic peace church and therefore family violence among us should not be an issue. However it is apparent that we have abused children and battered wives in our churches. This may not be so surprising when we look at the way we continue to keep women and children subordinate and repressed in the lifestyle of many of our churches.

We welcome your letters pertaining to family violence and will save space for them in the next Report--Focus on Family Violence, Part II. We would particularly appreciate contributions on nonviolence and self-defense.

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Sources used:

Rosemary Radford Ruether. "The Judeo-Christian Tradition and Violence Against Women in the Home." Cassette tapes.

Mary Van Stolk. "Battered Women, Battered Children." Children Today (March-April 1976).

*The above article was written by Mabel Paetkau, Abbotsford, B.C., member of the MCC Peace Section Task Force on Women, who compiled material for this and the subsequent issue.*

Male seed is the perfect image of the Father.

ARISTOTLE

Woman is like a nail driven into the wood.

MARTIN LUTHER

Dames are simple. I never did see one that didn't understand a slap in the mouth.

HUMPHREY BOGART in a movie role

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND THE LEGAL SYSTEM  
by Ruth Carol Stoltzfus

Domestic violence is unique as a crime. Perpetrator and victim are not only well acquainted, their entire lives are bound up together. They share a sexual relationship, children, home, marriage, property or some combination of these. Because of these circumstances the crime usually has a wider circle of victims, is more devastating to their lives than any chance assault by a stranger, and at the same time is less likely to be treated by the courts with the seriousness given to other criminal matters.

As a Legal Aid attorney dealing with domestic violence on an almost daily basis, these statements outline the context of the problem as I observe it.

Yet there are ambiguous areas here, reasons for family violence which I don't yet understand, reasons why the legal system is so clumsy a tool for meeting the problem. Real life cases illustrate the complexities most readily. Let me state the facts of a few cases which came to my office one day recently and the disposition of each, because any attempts to weigh and try solutions are part of an effort still in progress.

Morning, September 5, 1978, Barbara T. comes in. She and her four children, ages 7, 6, 5, and 1 have been sleeping at different neighbors' for the last three days. She's been too wrought to sleep or eat, though Salvation Army gave her food and the children are all right. Husband Roy, who has been abusive in the past, had threatened her with a knife, then grabbed a child and held a knife to him, picked another child up by the hair and threw him down on the walk. She swore out a warrant for child abuse and non-support. He has been arrested and is now at the Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court. We rush off to court together and she fills in the details along the way.

The couple is buying their FHA house, a significant fact which will complicate everything. Because it is his property as well as hers, the court cannot order him away from it. Yet she has no other place to go with four children. In court I state this to the judge, asking for an order of non-harassment to keep him away from the house. After she tells her story, the judge orders him to stay away and not to harass her. This is only a temporary order pending trial on the criminal charges. We are lucky.

Disposition: On the day of the trial, the judge continues the criminal charges indefinitely, stating that to impose either a fine or a jail sentence would only hinder the husband in supporting his family. No one wants to try the charges and the husband knows this. In effect, an assault on a legal dependent is unpunishable because the sanctions would hamper the assailant's ability to support that dependent. The husband's appointed attorney objects that the non-harassment order deprives his client of a property right in his house without due process of the law, that is notice and a hearing. We get the order continued in effect anyway, pending a property settlement agreement. The judge has actually given my client a remedy beyond that which the law permits.

The husband later drives past the house a number of times, finally stops, stands across the street and casually takes out his knife and throws it into a tree. The client, afraid to leave her house, calls me. I have the police drive by and tell the husband to leave. Meanwhile, the children miss Daddy and we must arrange for visitation with them, but it must take place out of the wife's presence.

Rhoda Y., on the other hand, thought things out in advance. She lived with Carl for six years. They are not married and have an eight-month-old baby. She wanted to leave long ago, but she says he threatened her life and the baby's and "anyone who helps me." Her father comes in and we discuss a plan for her to leave safely. She does, timing her departure with the summons to court served on him by a deputy sheriff. She has petitioned for support for the child and a non-harassment order. The violent rage she expected never materialized. But the morning he woke and found their trailer empty he was seen leaving with a rifle and he went to the baby-sitter's and her place of employment asking for her.

**Disposition:** In court Rhoda is self-controlled, neat, middle-class and credible.

The judge orders support and then takes the unusual step of ordering an investigation before permitting the father the visitation rights which are normally given automatically. Carl acts strangely in court, and says he's not sure if he'll leave her alone, but is ordered to do so. Both Carl and Rhoda's parents are attempting to monitor the situation and we arrange a joint meeting of parents and the couple at my office. This may resolve things but Carl appears impulsive and unreliable to me. After court he storms off. Rhoda hugs his parents, crying, and tells them she still feels close to them and wants them to see the child often.

Dolores B. is also unmarried, but she is entangled in a long, degrading and violent relationship. She's been separated from Doug, her one-time boyfriend, for months but today she comes in with a swollen, bruised eye. Doug broke into her apartment again, beat her and stole her glasses. He had broken them recently and Medicaid replaced them, but they will replace glasses only once every two years. Doug knows this. Dolores is under continuing psychiatric care and is apparently preyed on by Doug only when he's drunk. Nearly two years ago he shot her in the stomach and she was hospitalized for two weeks and underwent surgery. She wants to sue him for this injury, but we both know that this may be a suicidal move, as he could well decide to kill her rather than pay off any successful claim. Yet she has additional expenses and continual discomfort for which she should fairly be compensated. Fortunately these parties never married. If they had, she would be barred from suing her spouse for damages, such suits deemed by the law to be disruptive of marriage.

Today I put off deciding about the personal injury suit and advise her to bring criminal charges for the recent assault and battery. Since he is still on probation for shooting her, a conviction would revoke his probation and he would serve time. This would solve the problem by giving her a temporary respite from the constant abuse, although Doug's son, who has served time for murder, has also threatened her life if she does anything which would put his father in jail.

**Disposition:** Later we file the personal injury suit. Before the criminal trial, Dolores receives further threats and harassment. Then Doug breaks into her apartment while a friend is there. (At least this time we have a witness.) Crippled by fear and near hysteria, she begs to be hospitalized. Her psychiatrist, whom I have previously consulted, is trying to admit her as soon as a bed is available and we discuss whether she'll be stable enough to testify at the criminal trial in two weeks. I urge her to stay overnight with a friend, hoping she can be admitted the next day.

One hour later, Doug breaks into her apartment again while she was trying to get some desperately needed rest. She manages to run out to the street and safety. I will urge her to bring criminal charges for breaking and entering, although she

may be too mentally devastated to testify.

A call comes in from a Mrs. E. in a nearby county. Her husband is wealthy and politically influential in the local Republican party organization. She has been abused for eighteen years and has sometimes had to send the children away to sleep for their safety. She is not eligible for legal aid, so I make a referral. Though our office does not usually receive calls from battered women from middle class and wealthy families, private attorneys, particularly women, do. I can tell from my conversation with this woman that it took years for her to believe that she shouldn't be beaten, that she should not have to tolerate that kind of life, children or no children.

Mary I. has been separated from her husband over a year. I have drafted her final divorce decree when she calls asking about visitation. When her husband gets out of jail, must she permit him to visit the child? I look briefly at her file and explain with some impatience that yes, unless we can show probable harm to the child, judges are very reluctant to limit that parental contact. She balks, then becomes adamant--she will not permit any visitation. I repeat my view of the parental rights involved.

After we hang up I look again at her file. My earlier notes show that her husband had beaten her often, threatened the lives of her family members, shot at her mother's house, dragged her up the street behind a school and beaten her, choked and hit her while she was pregnant, etc. She had slept next to him with the light on at night before finally leaving him while pregnant. This man may still be entitled to visitation with their baby girl and may never harm her. But the prospects for reasonableness between the two parents in arranging and carrying out the visits aren't good and I wasn't taking that into account. I called Mary back to qualify my earlier remarks and we are still working on visitation arrangements.

Bonnie C. and her husband come in to sign a separation agreement. They have been married thirteen years, have four children. She sits primly, determined, and does not smile. The husband is good looking, conversational with her, even seductive. My notes say that he has choked her dozens of times, knocked her down, threatened her with a knife. She is a Christian, and knows he has violated their marriage vows and knows also that their children are learning from them how a man and woman relate. It is not what she wants to teach. She confided that he still doesn't really think he'll lose her.

Today he is friendly and obliging, but he looks so slippery I wonder if he'll sign the terms of the agreement. She sits apart from him, acknowledges his words but gives little response. They do sign and leave together. He laughs and, looking to see if I'm watching, puts his arm around her. She pulls away and walks on.

Evening, September 5, 1978. It is difficult for me to go home tonight and feel optimistic about the possibilities for human relationships. Each situation has been "resolved" within the limitations of the legal system; each remains unresolved in fundamental ways. It is perhaps natural that a Mennonite would be baffled by many aspects of violence in our society. When that violence is perpetrated within the family it is especially difficult to understand. Along with many who are thinking, writing and working on domestic violence, I speculate about its relationship to economic and psychological pressures, the overloaded nuclear family, the propensity to violence generally which seems so American. With the prevalence of domestic violence in so many families, one must at least conclude that it is a

reflection and an acting out of a widely held view of women as persons to be dominated. My own minimal aim is to move individual women, not only to take specific legal action with all its personal costs and burdens, but to reject that assumption and to begin to gain effective control of their lives.

*Ruth Carol Stoltzfus, Linville, Virginia, is a lawyer for the Legal Aid Society in Harrisonburg, Virginia.*

BATTERED WIVES AND THE COMIC STRIPS  
by Marie Snider

Between 1967 and 1973, the Vietnam War caused the deaths of 39,521 Americans. During that same time period, 17,570 Americans died as a result of battles between family members.

We like to view the American family as a safe haven from the pressures of the outside world--a place where family members can return to find love and a sense of caring. Unfortunately the truth is otherwise--for too many Americans the family is a battle-ground of domestic violence.

Experts estimate that there are between 3,500,000 and 4,000,000 women who suffer extreme physical violence at the hands of their husbands and lovers, not to mention thousands of battered husbands and maltreated children.

In fact, so severe is the problem that in June 1977 Congress passed the Domestic Violence Prevention and Treatment Act. This legislation was the first bill designed to assist battered women and their families.

Dr. Suzanne K. Steinmetz reported at congressional hearings on domestic violence that an estimated 250,000 husbands are battered by their wives annually.

The article in which this statement appeared was accompanied by a typical "Bringing Up Father" comic strip, first showing Jiggs staring at a shapely girl and at the end of the strip picturing Maggie giving him the usual sock in the eye. Then the article went on to establish a connection between husband battering and such comic strips as Jiggs and Maggie saying, "Authorities who are experts on the 'battered husband' claim females have been conditioned by such comic strips, other societal pressures and frayed human nature to try force when all else fails in a stormy domestic scene."

The point about the comic strips influencing behavior is well taken. Maggie has been giving Jiggs this kind of treatment daily ever since the pair were first introduced to the American public in 1913.

No one can dispute that the comics are the most widely read of all current literature. It is estimated that six of every ten readers read the comics every day, and over 100 million persons read the comics section each Sunday. And who has not heard of a Dagwood sandwich, Wimpy's hamburgers, Buster Brown shoes, or Superman?

Certainly any medium that consistently holds the interest of hundreds of millions of people deserves serious attention and study. And serious students of the comics agree that the strips both closely reflect the times and help to change the society. Heinz Pulitzer in an article entitled "From Little Nemo to Li'l Abner" states it crisply, "The comic not only takes shape under the eyes of the public, the public takes shape along with it."

Having accepted the premise that the comics do in fact both "mirror" and "influence" society, it is easy to assume that strips like "Bringing Up Father" may both reflect acceptance of and help to normalize the use of violence against a husband.

However, the question then emerges--What of wife battering?

The fact of the matter is that by and large males (unless they are villains) do not hit females in the comics. Violence is directed from male to male and from female to male, but seldom from male to female. This in face of the fact that there is nearly twenty times the incidence of wife battering as of husband battering--a ratio of 4 million to 250,000.

Why is this wife battering never reflected in the comics? While it is true that authorities agree that the comic strips reflect society; it is also suggested that the comics can successfully reflect to the readers only what they want to see about themselves and their society.

A case in point is the very first comic, "The Yellow Kid", created by Richard Outcault in 1896. A bald-headed little urchin in a yellow nightgown, the kid reflected all of the poverty, crudeness, and vulgarity of the turn of the century New York slums. At first "The Yellow Kid" was a sensation, but soon the public reacted to the strip. In fact, some critics seemed to hold the cartoon responsible for the ugliness it depicted.

By 1902 Outcault replaced "The Yellow Kid" with the impeccable "Buster Brown," Buster was clearly middle class and indisputably well-behaved, every mother's perfect little gentleman. Readers liked the side of society they saw in Buster Brown and he survived. In fact a whole generation of little boys had their hair cut and shirts styled like Buster, and children today are still wearing shoes named after him.

It appears likely that just as the reading public at the turn of the century did not really want to see the conditions in the slums, so the reading public of the mid- and late twentieth century would not want to face head-on in the comics the true facts about domestic violence, particularly against women and children.

This does not mean the comics are irrelevant. What we do find in the comics that is relevant is rampant sexism. Women are consistently portrayed as sex objects. Arthur Asa Berger in The Comic-Stripped American observes, "Women in the comics tend to be characterized as love objects, one more complication in some male's pursuit of power and glory."

John Hulteng and Roy Paul Nelson in The Fourth Estate observe, "No other journalist gets away with the cartoonists' use of stereotypes." They then go on to cite as one example of those stereotypes, "Any pretty girl is busty. And busty girls are not very bright." And a careful observer of the comics might add further that most unmarried girls are both pretty and busty in sharp contrast to the unattractive nagging women with whom most married men of the comics find themselves trapped.

An article entitled "The All-American Blood-Soaked Family" in the February 1976 issue of Human Behavior says, "There is something in the family as we know it that makes it preeminent in respect to all types of physical violence, from slaps to torture and murder." That something, the article suggests, "is sexism. The family is part of a social structure that keeps women subordinate, through force

if necessary. The marriage license according to this view, is a 'hitting license' that legitimates a man's right to keep his woman in line."

Maybe all of those busty unmarried sex objects and the ugly nagging married shrews of the comics are telling us something about our values after all. Perhaps we as a society, as evidenced by 4 million battered wives, really believe a man has a right to keep "his woman" in line.

*Marie Snider, Director of Public Information for Prairie View Mental Health Center, Newton, Kansas, is completing a master's thesis on sex roles in the comic strips: 1896-1976.*

## News

### REFLECTIONS ON LEARNING TO FLY

Report from the Third "Persons In Ministry" Conference  
by Joyce M. Shutt

An African farmer had a pet eagle which he raised with his chickens. The eagle, seeing only chickens, accepted their way as his own norm. Occasionally he'd flap his wings, but most of the time he scratched in the dirt for worms.

A friend of the farmer marveled at the eagle's passive acceptance of chicken-hood. "But he's an eagle," he'd insist. "He should fly." The farmer would laugh. "That eagle will never fly." The friend scratched his head. "May I try to teach him to fly?" The farmer threw some corn to the eagle and chickens. "Go ahead, but it won't work. That eagle thinks it is a chicken."

The farmer's friend worked and worked to teach the eagle how to fly. Day after day he'd climb a tall tree, place the eagle on the end of a limb and push it off. Each time the eagle would flutter its wings so it would float to the ground, but it would not soar into the air and fly as eagles are created to do. Finally, the farmer's friend took the eagle up to a high mountain crag where other eagles swooped and soared. But the eagle, used to seeing itself as a chicken, backed away from the ledge in fear. The man, however, kept the eagle there for many days. One morning he took the eagle to the ledge just as the sun slipped above the horizon. The eagle, seeing the shining rays of sun, opened its wings in joyful response to its overwhelming beauty and soared out toward the rising sun.

This African story, shared by Marion Keeney Preheim, opened the third "Persons on Ministry" Conference, this time held at the Akron Mennonite Church in Akron, Pennsylvania, on October 27 through 29. "The story, often told in Africa by black liberation leaders to picture what white colonialism has done to the blacks, is also a good one to describe what's happened to women in the church," she pointed out. "Instead of being told we are eagles so we can soar into the sunrise of God's becoming call to service, we continue to scratch in the dirt for worms."

Conferences are strange experiences. The speakers, so vital for the input and expertise they bring, shape the nature of discussions. Yet the success or failure of such gatherings lies more in the extra-curricular conversations than in the presentations themselves. After the session--these are the times a shy stranger comes forward and says to another, "thank you. Never before have I heard a woman dare to say openly, 'My goal is to be ordained.' That gives me hope and support in pursuing my own sense of call." Or friend hugs friend. "I couldn't make it without your support. It's so good to have you here today." Or "I've been thinking

about what you said in the question and answer period. We Mennonites may have the gift of family, but the women who are widowed, divorced or outside of our comfortable middle class do not have the luxury of staying at home all day with their children. Instead of criticizing them and making them feel guilty we in the church have a moral and spiritual obligation to support our sisters by providing quality day care at reasonable prices."

There is always so much to absorb at conferences such as this one. Even the name pushed us to be more honest and open. Somewhat afraid of raising defenses, the name "Persons in Ministry" had been chosen, when the actual thrust was really "women in ministry." Arlene May, psychologist and retired professor at Eastern Mennonite College, reminded us that sex roles are more culturally determined than biologically. Her statements were a rerun of things we already knew and believed, yet her unique way of phrasing and her illustrations enabled us to better understand the conflicts facing us as we weave our way through marriage, parenthood, job, singleness and school.

Dorothy Nyce, a student at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries, presented a careful report on "Women in the Pulpit Ministry in Nineteenth Century U.S." which filled us with pride. Hearing that women struggled with the same questions and issues a hundred years ago and that there were more ordained women between 1800 and 1900 than from 1900 to 1978 made us want to laugh and cry at the same time.

Ruth Brunk Stoltzfus, teacher, counselor and originator of "Heart to Heart" radio program, had a gift for words and quotable quotes which kept our pencils scratching. Regal in her simple dress, severe hair style and head covering, she spoke with a quiet authority that few will ever command. She reminded us that "in spite of the fact that we have been told that "a woman's face is her future, and her body her mission" Jesus called for something different for women. Jesus is the true radical. He demonstrated in his teachings and actions that he expected women to use their gifts for God's glory and that too often we are guilty of heresy which begins by building our theology on one or two verses."

Willard Swartley, scholar, teacher, minister at Eastern Mennonite College and Seminary zeroed in on the language issue. "Words are crucial to our understanding of ourselves and God. They are so crucial that they shape our perspectives on life, power, self-worth, authority and service. In the Hebrew language, the word 'word' means 'power.' We must keep searching for new ways to translate the Biblical phrases and passages which are bi-sexual and inclusive in the Greek or Hebrew, but come out sounding exclusively masculine in English."

Without a doubt, the most important element of the conference was the emotional, spiritual and moral support which we all found as we came together and shared our own personal pilgrimages and understandings of life and God. Suddenly we no longer felt alone and different. As Ruth Brunk Stoltzfus said, "For most of my life I thought I was weird because I wanted to use my mind and I loved to preach. In places like this, I discover many women who share those dreams and gifts."

Building on Marion Keeney Preheim's opening story, God's chicken yard is filled with chickens and eagles, each unique, each gifted, each precious in his own sight. From Emma Richards, co-pastor at the Lombard Mennonite Church, on down to the shy listeners in the back row, each came away praying "Lord teach us to fly. Not for the wrong reasons, Lord. Not to feed our egos, but so that we can share the hope and joy which comes from experiencing your love and forgiveness."

## Verbs

Joyce Shutt, Fairfield Mennonite Church, Ortanna, PA, was licensed to the ministry for one year in early December. Joyce is a Master's of Divinity candidate at Lutheran Theological Seminary, Gettysburg, PA.

Emma Richards, co-pastor of Lombard Mennonite Church in Illinois and the one ordained woman in the Mennonite Church, preached at the Akron Mennonite Church in Pennsylvania, Sunday morning, Oct. 29.

Jake Friesen, Newton, KS; Ethel Yake Metzler, Goshen, IN; Marion Preheim, Akron, PA and Joyce L. Yoder, Washington, D.C. were selected at the October Persons in Ministry Conference to help execute the conference's priority objective--to help get women into church leadership positions. The committee was asked to plan the next (annual) conference and to initiate serious conversations about issues related to women serving fully in the church with the appropriate persons in the churches' structures and organizations.

Mary Dueck, Fresno, CA, is a new U.S. member of the Task Force on Women. She is director for a private institute which teaches English as a second language to about 200 students. Mary is a member of the Mennonite Brethren church. Anita Buller, Winnipeg, Manitoba, was chosen to replace outgoing Task Force member Erna Klassen.

Our Lamps Were Lit, an informal history of the Bethel Deaconess School of Nursing, Newton, KS, written by Katie Funk Wiebe, has recently been published by Mennonite Press, Newton.

Task Force member Mabel Paetkau reports that the November 18 study conference on Biblical Perspectives of Women in the Church, sponsored by MCC British Columbia, was a very positive experience for the 200 participants.

Nancy S. Lapp served as chairperson of the planning committee and moderator for the November 24-26 conference on Biblical Understanding of Women and Men in the church, sponsored by the Task Force and MCC West Coast. Harold Bauman and Herta Funk served as resource persons for the 32 persons present.

The Report is a bi-monthly publication of the MCC Peace Section Task Force on Women in Church And Society. Correspondence should be sent to Gayle Gerber Koontz, 27 Fairlawn St., Everett, MA 02149.

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